

Buried in boxes by my desk are mementos from 15 years of travel. Newspapers written in the pidgin English of New Guinea and photographs of huge stones in England lie among menus from French restaurants and programs from Dallas concerts.

On a bookshelf, there's a gray piece of roofing slate from a walking trip in the Lake District in England; in a desk drawer, there's a carved cow bone that Argentine cowboys use to play a gambling game on saddle blankets. Arrogant, knife-fighting rascals, those dark-headed gauchos. Mean enough to eat horse meat, yet willing to give a guest a keepsake they'd packed for years in a saddle bag.

The bedroom closet holds a big accumulation of travel equipment. It falls four units short of controlling the world's supply of shaving kits and handy plastic pouches. The stash of mink oil boot dressings, 24-hour insect repellent, and double duty sun screens exceeds the combined inventory of Angelo's sporting goods stores.

Two bottom dresser drawers store cameras and binoculars. The longer the trips became, the harder I searched for lighter gear. At first I carried along a case full of lenses and cameras to shoot two kinds of film. After a few trips, I dropped the photographer's bag in favor of a lighter camera and a slimmer pair of binoculars to pack in a disgraceful army surplus gas mask pouch that must have been on the losing side of a war.

Lots of the horde is being saved until I need things like an air mattress that deflates every three hours, or a poncho to stay dry in a heavy mist. Folding utensils stowed in a mess kit from a long-ago island camping trip on St. Kitts are on reserve for emergency evacuation of the shortgrass country in the event the millennium closes down the area's grocery stores and hamburger joints. Three sizes of water flasks and a rusty capped bottle of water purifier are also on-ready in case the escape route goes south into Mexico.

On the closet floor, a rubber boot left from an Arctic trip is better for storing house slippers and tennis shoes than a shoe bag. The folding baggage cart, made obsolete by modern luggage, is on standby in case my roll-aboard suitcase needs to be sent to the shop for new bearings, or wheel alignment. The old cart brings back a lot of memories of how many pesos I saved in Mexico, propelling it across the cobblestones to the catcalls of the hundred so porters hustling the airport crowds. (Those damn kids can fleece you out of a dime a bag faster than a shuck comes off a fat tamale.)

The only orderly part of the closet is the five pairs of walking shoes from Maine on a cedar shoe rack. Until Christmas, every time I slipped on a pair, I visualized a New England shoe cobbler, snowbound all winter in a log cabin, hammering and sewing shoes to hand to his little grandson to polish and thread in the laces.

But a shopping trip to Austin changed the image. My old shoes were size 11 or 12 B. The pair the clerk fitted on me were size 13MK, or 13 medium kayak. Such a huge shoe makes finding standing room at theaters difficult and riding an escalator facing the right direction impossible. Doctors prescribe heavy shoes to strengthen the patient's calves. But I didn't want to be strong, and I sure don't want to leave a track like the skid mark of a Michelin 500.

Back home, I discovered why the new size was larger. Printed on the tongue was the following: "Uppers made in China. Bottoms man-made." The tongues in the other read from "Portugal," "Croatia," "Brazil" and "Ecuador." Croatia scored the highest on leather quality, the Portuguese produced a better fit, and the Brazilians and Ecuadorians tied for the best shine.

I rang up customer service in Rockport, Maine for a tip on a use for the new pair of Chinese Rockports, like maybe trimming the soles small enough to make sled runners, or a set of children's skis. After a stunned silence, she parroted a command to send the shoes back for examination. I told her mail service to China from Mertz on was terrible and could she exchange the Chinese pair for a pair of Portuguese Rockports? She became so upset, she said she'd send a new pair of shoes.

The drouth has sure changed my travel plans. The county claims they are going to have to pave the road by my ranch house. If they'll get busy I might raise enough dough

selling some of this stuff in a garage sale to take one more
trip ...